

PROFILE

Medeet Simensen

Cyril H. Wecht: Coroner and Skeptic

by Jack Grochot

The arms flail excitedly when he drives a point home. The eyebrows bounce. And the voice—the voice is raspy and precise, like that of a seasoned television commentator. At the beginning of an important sentence it is a rich baritone. At the conclusion it is nearly a shriek.

If the subject is politics, law, or medicine, the baritone and shriek are accompanied by unsynchronized contortions of the eyebrows and limbs. Above all, however, the voice communicates conviction, whether the subject is a gruesome homicide or recent political events, and, in Pittsburgh, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two topics.

The voice belongs to Cyril Harrison Wecht, a man who is driven, though he can't nail down what drives him. Neither can his allies—or his enemies. Perhaps it's his interest in the profession, maybe it's his commitment to it, or it just may be his insatiable curiosity.

Wecht is the coroner for Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. From his dreary office on the second floor of the morgue, Wecht has extended his opinions and expertise beyond the confines of his political subdivision. He has delved into the complicated details of several nationally-publicized homicides, including the assassination of President Kennedy, the drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne, the slaying of Robert F. Kennedy, the Black Panther killings in Chicago, and the 1968 riots in Cleveland that left seven black militants and three policemen dead.

Cyril Harrison Wecht is most often remembered for coining the now-familiar Pittsburgh phrase, "political-racket complex." It is a description

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that he, followed by federal law enforcement authorities, successfully applied to certain politicians suspected of having gangland connections. Wecht has suspected an unusual number of local VIPs. Some have already been convicted or indicted for mob-related activities while in positions of public trust.

All this has little to do with the profession Wecht chose, except that he contends that the political-racket complex affects the lives of all Pittsburghers.

Wecht's views on the J.F.K. murder, which he discussed long after the nation had digested the Warren Commission Report, have disturbed a great many people. Yale law professor Burke Marshall, executor of the late president's estate, called Wecht offensive. He claimed that Wecht's curiosity about the assassination—sanctioned by an assignment from the American Academy of Forensic Scientists—violated the privacy rights of the Kennedy family. But Wecht feels that "while he was a husband and father, John F. Kennedy also happened to be President of the United States—my presi-

dent."

Wecht is one of a handful of forensic pathologists who also have law degrees. His bibliography could rival the technical monographs of Sherlock Holmes. The fictional detective once penned a treatise entitled "Upon the Distinction Between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos," while among his 118 writings, Cyril Harrison Wecht lists "Aspects of Blood Grouping Tests in Paternity Suits."

Parallels between Wecht and the private eye of Baker Street arise repeatedly in his daily functions. He has detected murders in cases that were written off as suicides. He has provided the key clue in homicide cases that otherwise would have been perfect crimes. Like Holmes, Wecht is a student of the science of deduction.

Wecht has accumulated numerous licenses to practice medicine and law; he is a member of 18 medical societies and scientific organizations, 11 legal societies, 19 medico-legal societies, and 21 community organizations (including GASP, the Group Against Smog and Pollution), and holds editorial positions on 12 legal-medical journals. He also finds some time for a wife, three sons, a daughter, a dog, two alley cats, and a summer home in Connecticut.

There was a time in the 1960s when Wecht had six jobs—Assistant District Attorney, pathologist in a VA hospital, instructor at Duquesne University's law school, part-time lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, member of a law firm, and director of the Pittsburgh Pathological and Toxicological Laboratory, a private concern.

When asked his age, Wecht must pause to divert his concentration from something more significant. "Forty-three, I think," he answers with some doubt. Then, "Yes, forty-three. I'm certain now."

In 1969, while campaigning for the

office of coroner in an area where support or opposition from industry can swing an election, Wecht came nose to nose with the bigshots. He confirmed at a public health hearing what had long been suspected: the air over Pittsburgh could be deadly. And he proved it with cases he had worked on while he was forensic pathologist in the coroner's office. The candidate asserted that when pollution levels increase noticeably, unexpected deaths among the elderly rise in proportion. Sulfur dioxide, the most common Pittsburgh pollutant, is transformed into sulfuric acid when it mixes with the moisture in the lungs, Wecht pointed out.

Wecht's assignment by the American Academy of Forensic Scientists to probe the Warren Commission Report soon led him to become a consultant for the prosecution in the New Orleans trial of Clay Shaw, the accused conspirator of Lee Harvey Oswald. Although Shaw was acquitted, Wecht persists in debunking the commission's single-bullet theory of assassination. On the single-bullet theory, Wecht has insisted, depends the single-killer theory. No one man, Wecht contends, could have fired enough shots to strike both Kennedy and John Connally.

Wecht believes Oswald had accomplices who set him up, that there is evidence to show it, and that the commission headed by the late Justice Warren took part in a deliberate coverup.

Certain acquaintances, "a few of my more sedate and conservative colleagues," have hinted to Wecht that his aggressive and persistent probing of the Warren Commission Report is improper. Yet no real answers to points raised by Wecht have been heard from the Justice Department, the FBI, or from individual members of the commission.

On the commission's theory that a single bullet, after passing through Kennedy's body, wounded the governor, not once but three times, Wecht notes, "This bullet struck Kennedy in the back. It exited through his throat. Moving then in midair from right to left, it entered Governor Connally, who was sitting directly in front of Kennedy in the jump seat of the car. It entered

behind his right armpit and exited through his chest. It entered the back of his wrist and exited through the front of his wrist. It then entered his left thigh.

"On the diagrams made by three military pathologists at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland on the night of the assassination, the bullet hole in Kennedy's back was six inches below the crest of his shoulder. That created a problem. How could a bullet fired from the sixth floor of a building into an automobile enter a man's back six inches below the shoulder and come out through his throat? That would mean the bullet did a U-turn. The pathologists solved the problem by moving the bullet hole up several inches and saying the original sketches were incorrect. The pathologist in charge made the sketches on Friday night. On Sunday he burned them. According to what he told the Warren Commission, he wanted to start a fire in his fireplace and there weren't any newspapers around. So he used his notes."

Wecht picks apart many other discrepancies—Kennedy's abrupt backward movement after his initial lurch forward, indicating the second shot came from the front; the bullet holes missed by those who examined the body at both Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas and at Bethesda; the fortuitous discovery of a bullet on a stretcher in the basement of Parkland. At first, Bethesda pathologists said the bullet had fallen out of Kennedy's back; the next day they decided it had fallen from his throat, and weeks later they concluded that it had fallen out of Connally's thigh. Etcetera.

The Kennedy family, Wecht conjectures, was initially unaware of all these things and, because of grief, anguish and shock, recoiled when doubts began to surface. About 18 months ago, Kennedy executor Burke Marshall permitted Wecht to inspect the autopsy materials in the National Archives as part of the coroner's assignment from the American Academy of Forensic Scientists.

Wecht discovered that Kennedy's preserved brain and the microscopic slides of tissue removed from his bullet

wounds were missing. Both, he said, were essential to an examination that could determine whether there was a bullet fragment in the brain, as indicated by a photograph, and whether one of those bullets might have entered Kennedy's body from the front.

The single-killer theory in the death of Robert F. Kennedy is also disputed by the Pittsburgh coroner, who had been called in as a consultant to the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner, Dr. Thomas Noguchi. Both are attempting to reopen the case against Sirhan B. Sirhan to determine if an accomplice was involved. Basically, Wecht's probe of that slaying has so far determined that two obvious discrepancies came to light after the Sirhan trial. One is that markings on the bullet recovered from the former Attorney General's body differ from markings on the bullet recovered at the murder scene. The second puzzling discovery is that Wecht believes the death bullet was fired only inches from the victim's right ear, yet witnesses testified that Sirhan was never closer than four feet from the victim.

Last year, Wecht traveled to London as a private consultant to perform an autopsy on a woman who had been buried for two years. She had been killed in a commuter train crash in Chicago, and the family sued the transit authority for \$1.4 million. The family's contention was that the woman lingered in pain before death, and they were asking punitive damages against the transit authority. Wecht's autopsy proved that death was not instantaneous. Through a toxicological examination, he discovered a high level of carbon monoxide in the corpse, indicating that the woman had inhaled the chemical from the fire that immediately followed the collision.

Similar local discoveries by Wecht have resulted in convictions of murderers who otherwise would have gone free. One such case is considered a classic in the annals of Pittsburgh homicides. The story opens with a domestic squabble and unfolds into a horror tale with a bizarre ending.

A young German woman, who married a Pittsburgh GI and later moved

Harper
Noguchi

in with his parents, stormed from their home one afternoon, following an argument. She was never again seen alive. The husband filed a missing person report with the police. About a week later, in a densely wooded section of suburban Pittsburgh, a curious hiker came upon the remains of a skeleton atop what appeared to be a funeral pyre of logs and automobile tires.

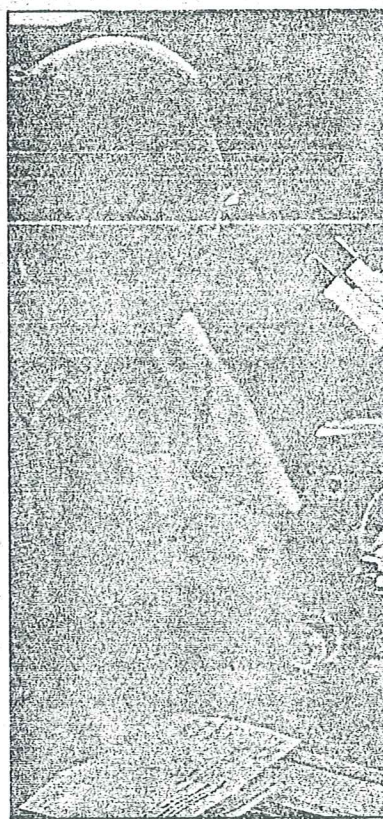
Detectives from the District Attorney's homicide squad investigated the scene, and collected intelligence information about inhabitants of the area. Soon they discovered the missing person report on the German native. They wired her former dentist overseas and received dental charts, then forwarded them to Wecht. His comparison positively identified the charred skeleton as that of the missing woman. Wecht's prior examination had already established that the weight and height of the woman matched the projected measurements of the fragmented bones.

With the identity established, detectives began questioning area residents and learned of a middle-aged recluse who had a history of violent behavior. They went to his ramshackle dwelling in the forest and interviewed him. After hearing from a friend, another hermit, that the recluse recently had displayed photographs of a nude woman on the floor of his home, detectives obtained a search warrant. They located the pictures in the man's bedroom and relatives of the dead woman identified her. The recluse then explained that he had found the victim, dead, along a seldom-traveled dirt road nearby.

The position of her arms and legs, the attitude of her facial muscles, her general posture, led Wecht to theorize that the woman was alive but unconscious in the photographs. Wecht also disclosed that there was no evidence of any wound from a blunt object such as a car. His examination of remaining bones confirmed what he had guessed from the photographs.

In the iliac crest of the hip bone, Wecht found a tiny amount of slightly moist marrow. His toxicological test showed that the woman had inhaled carbon monoxide to a level of 45 per-

cent. "Since there is no post mortem absorption of carbon monoxide," Wecht informed the detectives, "it is proven beyond a doubt that she was burned alive on the makeshift funeral pyre. Her death was the result of inhaling the carbon monoxide, not of burns, for she was wrapped in some type of carpeting material. I discovered some fibers attached to one of the bones." The recluse pleaded guilty to first de-



gree murder and was committed to a mental institution.

Wecht's curiosity seems to have rubbed off on the homicide squad members who work with him. "We tend to begin to think alike, and sometimes if we glance at each other a certain way, we know something is fishy—and we're both thinking the same thing," he said, recalling a particular case.

A routine autopsy was to have been performed on an infant who had alleg-

edly fallen from a highchair, struck her head on the corner of a table and died hours later. Her parents related these events to the unsuspecting police officers, who had taken the girl to a local hospital. Wecht's autopsy cast doubt on the reported accidental death. He listed the cause of death as internal injuries—all inconsistent with the slight bruise on the baby's head. Wecht listed the manner of death as undetermined and notified the homicide squad.

The suspicions of an investigator prompted him to research the parents' backgrounds, only to learn that the same thing had happened 18 months earlier to the child's brother. He had apparently died of internal injuries after falling from a dressing table. The detective noticed that Wecht's autopsy report on that case also listed the manner of death as undetermined. After a lengthy interrogation, the father broke down and admitted punching each child repeatedly in the abdomen. The mother apparently knew nothing of this abuse. "In this case I felt extremely satisfied," Wecht remembered, "because the couple had a third youngster at home. I believe we contributed to saving his life."

Wecht first went to medical school at the University of Pittsburgh. During his internship he began studying law and he completed law school during his residency. He was involved in politics even in his undergraduate years, championing the cause of student rights. "Politics is not just a necessary evil with me," he says. "I wouldn't be the coroner without it, sure, but there is much more to it than that. I enjoy it. I thrive on participating in the political process. I can tell you, simply, that there is nothing in any of our professions as full of life and as dynamic as forensic pathology. In this field you must deal with all facets of living. With microscopy, toxicology, the courtroom, law enforcement personalities, crisis situations and families who have never before been exposed to the criminal justice system. The work in the laboratory takes up maybe 15 percent of my time, at the outside. The remainder is dealing with the living." □